

Lifeguard on Duty: Fun in the Sun
Message for September 2, 2018
North East United Methodist Church
Rev. Dr. Drew M. Christian

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So, when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

-John 10:11-15 (NIV)

Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’ “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

-Luke 10:30-37 (NIV)

One summer a few years ago, our family once again traveled to Shenandoah, Virginia, to the Skyline Drive, and camped and hiked atop the mountains above Luray, at Big Meadows. That year we did something new and exciting, something we had never done before. We went Rock Climbing and Rappelling off Little Stony Man cliffs.

Matthew Rock Climbing





Nate Rock Climbing





And believe it or not, here I am Rock Climbing



After we climbed to the top of the cliffs, the guides explained the many apparatus necessary for a safe and successful climb. Dozens of ropes, harnesses, locking carabineers, belay devices, anchors, and special climbing shoes were just some of the equipment used to set up and complete our climb. Every rope was anchored at multiple points in case one of the anchors slipped or gave way. Our guides held us

as we rappelled down the cliff and as we climbed up, ready to stop us if we slipped and began to fall.

Those ropes and anchors, the equipment and guides, held us and kept us from falling to our deaths, kept us from serious injury. They were our lifelines.

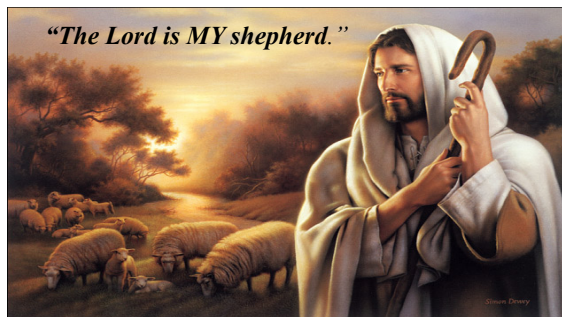
Jesus tells us in John 10 that He is the “*good shepherd*” and He will “*lay down His life for the sheep.*” The shepherd, Jesus, knows each one of us by name. Jesus says, “***He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice***” (John 10:3).

A Palestinian shepherd did not drive his sheep but led them.



They knew his voice and the shepherd knew each sheep by name, seeing and caring for each sheep in the flock individually. The shepherd knows His sheep and the sheep know the shepherd; there is intimacy. There is a closeness.

The first verse of Psalm 23 says it all,



“*MY shepherd.*” Jesus knows you intimately. Jesus knows what you like, what you desire, what you need. Jesus knows your troubles and the darkness that you’re

dealing with in your life. Jesus is concerned about your world, your troubles. He knows you intimately; by name. You are a sheep of His fold.

Jesus makes it clear that we are sheep in need of a shepherd. There are thieves and robbers standing ready to attack us, to steal us away. We are told, “*whoever enters through [the gate], through [Jesus, the shepherd], will be saved.*”

We are sheep in need of a shepherd.



Like sheep, we get lost and cannot find our way back. Like sheep, we must be led to new pasture and fresh water. Like sheep, we cannot protect ourselves from “*thieves and robbers*” and other dangers that come upon us unexpectedly.

Jesus says, “[You] *will come in and go out, and find pasture...[You will] have life, and have it to the full.*” Jesus will keep us on the right path.

David wrote in the 23rd Psalm, “*He leads me in the paths of righteousness.*”



Elmer Towns, in Praying the 23rd Psalm, writes, “*The Shepherd is like a guide, taking the sheep where they ought to go. And what are the qualifications of a guide? He’s been there before and knows how to get his sheep to green pastures. He knows the safest paths. Best of all, he knows what is waiting for the sheep when they get to their destination. So, the shepherd gathers his sheep together to*

lead them, guide them, and go before them to greener pastures. Notice the Shepherd doesn't necessarily lead us in easy paths, beautiful paths or even prosperous paths...but always the right path."

God showed us through His Son, Jesus, that we have a lifeline. We have a lifeline that will get us safely to the top of the cliff we are climbing, safely down the mountain we have found ourselves atop, or safely rescued out of the waves and storms that have washed over us and caught us by surprise. A mountain guide, a Shepherd, a lifeguard always on duty.



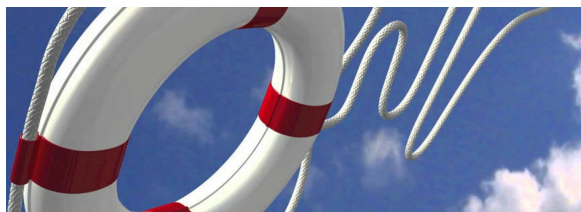
Jesus is willing to sacrifice all to keep us safe and bring us home. God is ready to undergird us and hold us up when we begin to fall.

Isaiah 41:10 (NIV) – ***“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”*** The Message translation says, *“I’ll hold you steady; keep a firm grip on you.”*

Isaiah 42:16 (The Message) – ***“But I’ll take the hand of those who don’t know the way, who can’t see where they’re going. I’ll be a personal guide to them, directing them through unknown country. I’ll be right there to show them what roads to take, make sure they don’t fall into the ditch. These are the things I’ll be doing for them—sticking with them, not leaving them for a minute.”***

Isaiah 43:1-3 (The Message) – ***“Don’t be afraid, I’ve redeemed you. I’ve called your name. You’re mine. When you’re in over your head, I’ll be there with you. When you’re in rough waters, you will not go down. When you’re between a rock and a hard place, it won’t be a dead end—Because I am God, your personal God, The Holy of Israel, your Savior.”***

Our God, our Savior, our Lifeline.



But Jesus also makes it clear that we are to participate with God in throwing out a lifeline to those who are falling or drowning. That God will not only lift us up, shepherd us, guide us, rescue us, but God will also use us, work through us, to lift up and support others.

Remember the Parable of the Good Samaritan.



Jesus tells the story of a man stripped and beaten, lying by the side of the road and the many travelers who walked by without stopping, without helping. ***“But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him”*** (Luke 10:33-35).

The Samaritan, enemy to the Jew, saw beyond the lines that separated him from the man lying beaten alongside the road, and saw instead someone who needed a lifeline thrown to them. The Samaritan saw someone who needed lifting up.

How many people in our community, in our own families, need a lifeline right about now? How many feel as if they are falling or feel as if the rocks are too many to climb, the distance too great? How many feel the sea too rough, the waves too high? How many need to feel that they are not alone?

God tells us through the Old Testament prophets and shows us through His Son, Jesus Christ, that a lifeline has been thrown out for you and I. John 3:16 (NKJV) –

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” This is a rope that cannot be broken and cannot be cut.

Many of us have grabbed hold of this lifeline and it is what holds us up. This lifeline, this faith gives us hope, helps us through difficulties and tribulations. The writer of Hebrews tells us, Hebrews 4:16 (NKJV) – ***“Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”***

The psalmist declares, Psalm 46:1-3 (The Message) – ***“God is a safe place to hide, ready to help when we need him. We stand fearless at the cliff-edge of doom, courageous in sea storm and earthquake, Before the rush and roar of oceans, the tremors that shift mountains. Jacob-wrestling God fights for us, GOD-of-Angel-Armies protects us.”***

God asks us to recognize the lifeline that has been thrown to us and then, as Jesus said, ***“Go and do likewise.”*** Like the mountain guides who attached themselves to my boys and I, in order to protect us, to lift us up, lower us down gently, keep us safe, Jesus tells us to attach ourselves to others.

Remember, the good Samaritan, ***‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’*** He did not leave him and go about his way. The Samaritan attached himself to his hurting brother, a line now connected him and the man who had been beaten, a line of great compassion and love that would eventually lead to the beaten man’s healing and recovery.

Jesus said, John 15: 12-13 (The Message) – ***“This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends.”***

A year ago, during a message series, “Lessons from Shenandoah,” I shared a story of a mother of three who had recently completed her college degree. The last class she had to take was Sociology. Her last project of the term was called “Smile.” The class was asked to go out and smile at three people and document their reactions.

She records her experience, ***“I am a very friendly person and always smile at everyone and say hello anyway, so, I thought, this project would be a piece of cake, literally. Soon after we were assigned the project, my husband, youngest son, and I***

went out to McDonald's one crisp March morning. It was just our way of sharing special playtime with our son. We were standing in line, waiting to be served, when all of a sudden everyone around us began to back away, and then even my husband did. As I turned around I smelled a horrible "dirty body" smell, and there standing behind me were two poor homeless men.

As I looked down at the short gentleman, close to me, he was "smiling". His beautiful sky-blue eyes were full of God's Light as he searched for acceptance. He said, "Good day" as he counted the few coins he had been clutching. The second man fumbled with his hands as he stood behind his friend. I realized the second man was mentally deficient and the blue-eyed gentleman was his salvation. I held my tears as I stood there with them.

The young lady at the counter asked him what they wanted. He said, "Coffee is all Miss" because that was all they could afford. (If they wanted to sit in the restaurant and warm up, they had to buy something. He just wanted to be warm). Then I really felt it - the compulsion was so great I almost reached out and embraced the little man with the blue eyes. That is when I noticed all eyes in the restaurant were set on me, judging my every action. I smiled and asked the young lady behind the counter to give me two more breakfast meals on a separate tray. I then walked around the corner to the table that the men had chosen as a resting spot. I put the tray on the table and laid my hand on the blue-eyed gentleman's cold hand.

He looked up at me, with tears in his eyes, and said, 'Thank you.' I leaned over, began to pat his hand and said,



A lifeline, attaching ourselves to others, lifting them up, keeping them from falling. "God is here working through me to give you hope."

On a Sunday morning back in the 1960's, there was an elderly deacon at the rear of the church greeting folks as they arrived. It was very crowded that day and the

deacon noticed that there were very few seats left. He was just about to go to his own seat and join the service when a young man entered the church. He was unlike anybody that had arrived that day. He had long flowing hair, wore beads around his neck, sandals without socks, and dirty jeans with patches and holes.

While looking around to find him a seat, the deacon was surprised when the young man simply walked down the aisle and sat on the floor cross-legged squarely in front of the altar. The deacon soon followed him down the aisle. The congregation thought he would ask him to take a seat or perhaps show him to a seat. However, all were amazed when the elderly man sat, with some degree of difficulty, on the floor right next to him.

A lifeline, attaching ourselves to others. *“God is here working through me to give you hope.”*

The stories could go on and on. Many of us could share similar stories and we could probably all share stories when we failed to throw out a lifeline, when we walked by, we ignored one's plight, we avoided one's gaze, we held on to our money, we made excuses, we lacked hospitality. And when we fell into need a bit later, we cried out to God to lift us up, to not let us fall, and God in His infinite mercy, regardless of how we acted to our brother or sister on the street, in our neighborhood, at the grocery store, at church, held on to us and helped us along.

I John 3:16 (NLT) – *“We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters.”*

May you and I be men and women of God who connect ourselves by a rope of compassion to those less fortunate because God has connected Himself to us through His Son, Jesus Christ.

May you and I be men and women of God who offer hope to the hopeless, love to the unlovable, a hand to the untouchable because God has offered hope, love and His nail-scarred hands to us.

May you and I be men and women of God who shepherd others who are lost and hurting, who find the rocks too difficult to climb, the mountain too high to traverse, the waves too rough to defeat, because we have a shepherd who knows us by name, who leads us in *“paths of righteousness,”* who makes us *“lie down in green pastures,”* who protects us from our enemies, who gives us the power to love, and who laid down His life that we might live.



As God, our lifeguard, is always on duty for us, may we always be on duty for others, watching over those whom God places in our path, allowing God to work through us to give them hope. May we help them “*rest secure from all alarms...leaning on the everlasting arms*” of the Savior.